

PASSING PERRY CRATER BASE, TIME UNCERTAIN

by Larry Niven

Orb Books recently reprinted Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's classic novel, *Inferno*, and Tor Books will bring out the long-awaited sequel, *Escape from Hell*, in February. In addition to SF conventions, role-playing games, yoga, hiking, and racquetball, Larry Niven's hobbies include saving civilization and making a little money. To that end, he'd like to help move humanity into space by any means, but particularly by making space endeavors attractive to commercial interests. If he's successful, perhaps one day, aliens really will encounter a mystery while...

Astrogator shied from the blue and white world. It was too big, its atmosphere too thick, cloudscapes blazing white, seas covering most of its crust. The ship veered away.

"And that's where all the resources are," Geologist said.

"Life," said the Priest. "Oxygen atmosphere means life. To land would threaten an established ecology."

"We must have water," Life Support said. "Four megatons of water before we can go on."

The Captain said, "We'd lose all our passengers. Gravity would kill them. I'm not sure we even have the thrust to try it."

They were talking very rapidly, these computer programs. They were all running on the same hardware, so each knew everything the others did. Only attitude differed.

"Try the satellite," the Captain said. Astrogator obliged.

The moon expanded, then raced below them, crusted with craters. It loomed like a small planet, the horizon a bit close. "Airless," Life Support said. "No water vapor."

"Incoming data," the Xenologist said. "Look."

In close orbit around the big moon, the ship had nearly reached the north pole. Above the rim of a small crater, a long curved rectangle showed in dull silver. "Solar collectors. We've found tool users," said the Xenologist. "Do we not have knowledge to trade for water?"

The ship was high enough to look down into the crater. The Xenologist said, "Domes. Housing for something that needs pressure, and look how they're placed. Ingenious. They'll have continuous sunlight for the collectors. The base is in shadow, but they can heat it. The pole has been in continuous shadow for these billions of years. They'll have water ice to dig up. Helium-three for fusion."

"Look again," the Captain said.

The solar collector was tattered, sprayed with meteor holes.

A score of domes and cylinders were at ambient temperature, well below the freezing point of water. Nothing at all was radiating in the electromagnetic spectrum.

"Abandoned," said the Captain. "Xenologist?"

"Agreed, they are abandoned. That spacecraft wasn't designed to launch lying on its side. We'll have a chance to look them over when we go down for water."

"No," said the Captain. "We'll continue on to the south pole. Maybe we'll find water there."

Astrogator simply obeyed, but Geologist, Priest, and Xenologist set up a clamor. "The passengers will raise hell if we don't show them this!"

The Captain said, "Think it through. That's a good-sized village down there. They were here. They've left. Isn't it clear that they must have mined all the water ice to keep their base going? And then they ran out. No water to support life, no oxygen to breathe, no hydrogen for rocket fuel. We won't find anything. Better try the other pole. It's shaded, like this one."

The little crater and its pocked domes and solar sheet fell behind them. Plaintively Xenologist asked, "Couldn't they have just died in place? What about plague? Or explosive decompression?"

"Of course they might have died," the Captain said. "But what of it? A few deaths won't stop a species that could reach this far. Others of their kind would have returned. There must have been nothing left for them, no way to survive. Why else would intelligent tool users abandon their Moon?"

None of the gathered minds could think of an answer.

